

Self-Regulation

Part I: Its Roots in Reich and Neill

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Introduction

Although virtually every age and culture is concerned with the rearing of its young, it is only during the twentieth century that scientific researchers have begun to disentangle systematically some of the almost limitless variables influencing the relationships between parents and children. Attention has focused not only on the variations in family constellations but also on alternatives outside the family, such as communal childrearing on *kibbutzim* or in various day-care arrangements. This two-part series will review the literature of one particular theory of childrearing, described by its proponents as "self-regulation."

Self-regulation's best-known exponents were Wilhelm Reich and A. S. Neill, the author of a book entitled *Summerhill* and principal of a school of that name in Leiston, England. Numerous articles appeared in a wide variety of publications dating from the 1940s to the present, written by Neill and others to amend and amplify his original formulations. They are composed of theoretical explications, descriptions, and prescriptions.

Essentially, self-regulation consists of responding to and supporting the primary needs of the infant and child so that the child's organism functions spontaneously and biologically without inner resistance or conflict (1). Its most succinct description appeared in an article in *The*

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Journal of Orgonomy by Dr. Barbara Koopman. She stresses the centrality of healthy sexual functioning for the child and then mentions some practices that follow from it:

Basic to this concept is the acceptance of a sex life for children at an age-appropriate level. Reich believed that allowing children to discharge their sexual energy with peers would divest the oedipal wish of its libidinal charge. With decathexis of the wish, there would be no need to repress it. It should be clearly understood that Reich never advocated sexual activity between children and adults, incestuous acting out, parental masturbation of children, or the salacious promotion of childhood sexual activity by adults. Rather, his concept entailed the non-interference with, as well as the protection of, peer-related sexual expression, as part of the natural life functioning of children. Thus, children were to be allowed privacy to masturbate, to embrace, or to explore each other sexually. They should not witness adult intercourse or adult nudity, since they lack the energetic capacity to tolerate them; but, if they came upon them accidentally, no fuss should be made. Above all, a wholesome non-pornographic attitude of the parents was important here. Sexual matters were to be treated with delicacy (not prudishness), seriously (not jokingly), and above all, with a sense of responsibility.

Infants were to be fed on demand; routine circumcisions were taboo; children were to be allowed to eat what they wished and toilet train themselves when ready. The basic need for loving contact was to be met, but not the willy-nilly gratification of every whim. Children were to be taught to respect the rights of others, measures for their own safety, and freedom with responsibility. (2:43-44)

In a 1976 lecture given in a course on Reich's work at New York University, Dr. Morton Herskowitz, a practicing medical orgonomist, amplified some of Koopman's points. He recommended that mother and newborn be allowed to retain visual and tactile contact during the period immediately following birth. He reiterated that male babies should not be circumcised. He supported demand feeding and suckling. He also felt the child should be allowed to wean itself. At the appropriate time, the child should be provided with an assortment of

nourishing and appetizing solid foods and allowed to choose its own menu. Toilet training would optimally be left to the child and in no case before sphincter control develops at about age one and a half. If the mother cannot tolerate waiting until the child trains himself when most children will, between about three and four, she should train him gently, with a great deal of positive reinforcement. When the child reaches the phallic stage, between three and six years, genital exploration occurs, as does experimentation with other children, mostly of the opposite sex. Parents should be accepting and casual about the child's sexuality, but never themselves inhibiting or provocative to the child. At all stages of development, the child should be allowed free expression of negative (as well as positive) emotions, such as anger, rage, crying, hatred, sadness, without, however, allowing him to injure others (3:20). The adults in the child's environment should express their own natural feelings, including anger and annoyance; but the child should be protected from unreasonable anger, fright, or moralizing (3:28).

Underlying these principles is the assumption that, if the child is allowed to gratify his normal, healthy drives, destructive, secondary drives will not develop (4:70). "Gratification of natural needs ... will never make spoiled children; it will only make independent, contented personalities" (3:30).

The main outlines of the concept of self-regulation, it should be pointed out, were forged in the early part of this century as an antidote to the excessive authoritarianism and repressiveness of the Victorian era (6:184). Childrearing practices, however, have changed generally, since Neill and Reich first began to evolve their ideas (7:400-25; 8:68-85). These differences are reflected in an article in *The Journal of Orgonomy* describing the Fifteenth Street School, a day school espousing organomic principles and patterned to some extent on Summerhill. Patricia Greene, its director, contrasts her own policies with those of Neill:

To compensate for the harsh rigidity and repressiveness of their early lives, Neill allowed children to rule the school and submitted himself to majority regulations established by the student government. Sometimes

he would encourage children to break windows and steal, knowing that once their angry rebellion had been expressed, the natural, creative, life-positive forces would take over

Whereas the battle for life had to be fought in those days against excessive structure and rigidity, today we are faced with the opposite, a battle against the forces of disintegration—things seem to be coming apart at the seams. Due to permissiveness at home, to the abandonment by parents of their natural authority, to the loss of energetic and emotional content in life, and to an intellectualization of feelings, parents are raising children whose structures are very weakly held together, who are holding on to themselves and to life by a slender thread Children subjected to such intellectual strains and permissiveness in place of the freedom to express natural feelings are understandably not very capable of self-regulation. Freedom itself and any kind of excitement rouses in them great anxiety and causes outbreaks of anger or brattiness which they simply cannot handle. So, at the same time that we allow the children to express their basic energetic functions, we also try to hold them together so that this opportunity for real expression won't frighten them to the point where they fall apart. (6:184-185)

Dr. Koopman notes similar problems in many children in her psychiatric practice:

Hyperpermissiveness in non-sexual matters is another pitfall of modern childrearing. For emotional health, the child does not require instant gratification of every whim and wish. Many parents who are incapable of real warmth lavish material supplies upon their children as a substitute contact. They fail to teach the child to be considerate of the rights of others. They also abdicate from guidance and instilling a sense of responsibility. The child grows up a self-centered little monster who thinks the world owes him a living without his having to exert himself in the slightest. He has been overindulged, but at the same time has never experienced any real, meaningful contact, so is love-starved at the core, tense, and miserable with his horn of plenty, without even knowing why. This is a far cry from the self-regulation proposed by Reich where basic needs are met but limits are set. Here the very opposite prevails. (2:53)

These quotations demonstrate that self-regulation is seen by its proponents as an alternative to both authoritarian and permissive styles of childrearing, and that the central concept remains essentially as originally formulated by Reich and Neill:

... freedom is the opportunity to express all the basic energetic impulses emanating from the core (emotional, physical, and intellectual), and that this expression becomes license when the movement is from the secondary layer. One has the freedom to express one's rational core self (as long as it doesn't interfere with the rights of others). The emotions that derive from the secondary layer are irrational and always interfere with life, and hence with the rights of others. They are therefore always licentious The unchannelled expression of these secondary emotions (contempt, hatred, greed, jealousy, and stubbornness), which were caused originally by emotional deprivation and inability to express the anger resulting from it, is license. (6:186)

As noted initially, the concept of self-regulation or freedom for children is perhaps best known in the United States through the works of A.S. Neill, especially his book *Summerhill* (1960). Neill was not, however, the first exponent of these ideas in the twentieth century. His direct antecedent was Homer Lane, the American founder of a self-governing reform school in Dorset, England, called the Little Commonwealth. In his introduction to a collection of Lane's lectures entitled *Talks to Parents and Teachers*, Neill acknowledges his debt to Lane in his characteristically "fireside" style:

Homer Tyrell Lane, of all the men I have known, was the one who inspired me most. I first met him in 1917, when I visited his Little Commonwealth in Dorset, England, where in 1913 he had been appointed superintendent of a colony of delinquent boys and girls who governed themselves in a small democracy, each person—including Lane himself—having one vote He showed me ... that the only way was to be, as he phrased it, "on the side of the child." It meant abolishing all punishment and fear and external discipline; it meant trusting children to grow in their own way without any pressure from outside, save that of

communal self government ... Lane showed me that emotions were infinitely more powerful and more vital than intellect. (7:5)

He introduced me to child psychology. He was the first man I had heard of who brought depth psychology to the treatment of children. (7:8)

When, in 1927, Neill founded his own school, it incorporated most of Lane's principles. At Summerhill, education was directed not toward the traditional goals of achievement of any predetermined pattern of adult life, or even set of skills, but rather toward valuing the process of living, the process of creating, with the child "designing his own way of living and following through the implications of this design" (8:74). In other words, Neill allowed the child's natural instincts and developmental pattern the freedom of their expression.

In 1937, 10 years after he established Summerhill in Leiston, Neill was invited to give a lecture at Oslo University and there met the second of the two men whom he counted as his mentors—Wilhelm Reich (8:108). After their first evening's conversation, Neill quotes himself as saying, "Reich, you are the man for whom I have been searching for years, the man to link the soma with the psyche. Can I come and study under you?" (9:190). For the next two years, Neill spent all of his school vacations in Oslo working and undergoing therapy with Reich. Their relationship rapidly became an intimate friendship (8:118), which lasted until the end of Reich's life. They continued to exchange ideas and manuscripts, and Neill spent an extended period in Rangeley, Maine, as Reich's guest. Neill was active in Reich's defense when Reich was jailed in the United States for failure to answer the accusation of the Food and Drug Administration that he had fraudulently advertised his orgone accumulator (9:191). After Reich's death in 1957, Neill continued his association with Reich's followers, cooperating in the publication of a volume of Reich's memoirs and contributing to *The Journal of Orgonomy*.

For Neill and Lane, the central concept of healthy childrearing had been freedom. For Reich and his coworkers, the central concept was self-regulation, the extension of freedom back to the moment of birth or even conception. As Neill later noted in an article he wrote for the

Orgone Energy Bulletin in 1950, very few of the children at Summerhill were in any sense free or self-regulated. This, he felt, posed problems for his own daughter, Zoe, self-regulated from birth (10).

A considerable literature has developed on freedom and self-regulation for children, especially in the orgonomic journals. More than 40 articles were published in the United States between 1942 and 1984. The literature includes, as well, all of A.S. Neill's works and two books by authors peripheral to but acquainted with orgonomy: Paul and Jean Ritter's *The Free Family* is an account of raising their own children with statements by the children themselves; A. E. Hamilton's *Psychology and the Great God Fun* is a description of the author's work with children in an urban day school setting and in a rural boarding school.

Self-Regulation: A Socio-Political Perspective

Beginning about 1936, Wilhelm Reich gradually became convinced that the only hope for the future of the human species was to change radically the nature of family life: the way children are birthed, raised, and, in their time, become parents. By 1940, Reich was convinced that the single most important work to be undertaken was the study of the child: the newborn, healthy organism. At that time, he and his coworkers established a group for "The Study of the Healthy Child." The object was to study and differentiate "health from sickness in newborn infants" (11:195) and to observe children's natural development. He became increasingly concerned with the way various institutions affected children's development. He encouraged educators and social workers, as well as physicians, nurses, teachers, parents, and other lay persons to report on their work and make observations of children. It was at this time that he developed a close personal and professional relationship with A.S. Neill, the leading exponent and theorist of "a free education" or what Reich termed, and Neill took up, "self-regulation."

In this section, self-regulation will be examined: First, as it was defined, elaborated, and applied in the work and writings of Reich, Neill, their coworkers and students; second, as it has been revised and reconsidered by contemporary writers, students of Reich's and Neill's work, and students of self-regulation, as a basis for childrearing and

education; and finally, as it serves to define those who accept these principles and practices as different from the mainstream population.

As mentioned above, self-regulation was first and foremost a condition of the individual's character structure (12:155-163) and the individual's ability to function with a genuine openness, spontaneity, and rationality as a result of his or her health (or degree of natural genitality) (12:156-158). The healthy, self-regulated individual does not adjust himself to the irrational part of the world and does insist on his natural rights. (12:156) The goal of character analysis is to help the individual resolve the blocks (both psychic and somatic) to the re-establishment of the natural, self-regulatory processes of human life (12:146-163).

As early as 1930, when Reich wrote the original version of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, he understood the only hope for a new society was to reach the masses and help them raise freer children.

The suppression of the natural sexuality of children and adolescents serves to mold the human structure in such a way that masses of people become willing upholders and reproducers of mechanistic authoritarian civilization. (13:322)

It was when Reich turned his attention to the problem of early childhood and development that he became more and more focused on how the newborn grows and develops, free of irrational suppression of its natural primary drives. Reich himself was not much interested in formulating a step-by-step definition of self-regulation. As was typical, he was more interested in finding out what self-regulation was by observing children and recording and studying the data in order to discover the true nature and function of these natural biological processes (11:194-206). For Reich, self-regulation was not a concept, but a biological observation (12:255-265), the respect for which should govern the role of adults:

The newborn infant, if no severe damage has been inflicted upon it already in the womb, brings with it all the richness of natural plasticity and developmental productivity. The newborn infant is not, as so many

erroneously believe, an empty sack or a chemical machine into which everybody and anybody can pour his or her special ideas of what a human being ought to be. It brings with it an enormously productive and adaptive energy system, which, out of its own resources, will make contact with its environment and *will begin to shape it according to its needs*. The basic and paramount task of all education, which is directed by the interest in the child, and not by interest in party programs, profits, church interests, etc., is to remove every obstacle in the way of this naturally given productivity and plasticity of the biological energy. These children will have to choose their own ways of being and will determine their own fates. We must learn from them, instead of focusing upon them our own cockeyed ideas and malicious practices that have been shown up as most damaging as well as ridiculous in every new generation. It is here only for the first time that a positive and broad base of operation has been found. (11:204-205)

For Neill, self-regulation is always used in the practical sense, as it applies to working (teaching) with children: "Self-regulation means behavior that springs from the self, not from outside compulsion" (14:26). His advice and views were all elaborations of how to deal with individual children in situations in ways that maximize a simple guiding principle (14-16).

What do they [his students] know of birth and sex and death, of their real feelings about family and school? What are their real loyalties, as opposed to the loyalties they have got from their teachers? One of my girls left Summerhill and was sent to a girl's school.

"How was it?" I said.

"Oh," she said with a chuckle, "I had a good time. You see, I was the only one who knew about babies and how they were made, and I spent my time as a sort of underground teacher, telling them all about it. Lord, they were an ignorant crowd."

"So, you corrupted the poor dears?" I said.

"Not me. I got fed up with their questions but they wouldn't leave me alone. Sex was the only thing they were interested in." (15:198)

Like Reich, Neill was insistent that a child could not grow up self-regulated unless the parents and other adults around were self-regulated, or at least able to tolerate self-regulation: "... a child cannot be more self-regulated than his mother is. Every mother must regulate herself first before she can rear a self-regulated child (14:26)." It was not enough to just understand the principles of self-regulation: One had to have a character structure that could tolerate genuine freedom.

Once we turn from the writings of Neill and Reich, we find that almost all the other work presents clearly defined principles and practical suggestions. Paul Martin develops a model for self-regulatory upbringing (3:18). In his "Sex-Economic Upbringing," he gives what amounts to a program to follow:

1. treat the child as an individual, with rights equal to your own;
2. let the parent and child make contact with each other, and allow equal expression and particular support for the child's need to reach out;
3. allow the child's own organic rhythms of natural life functioning to develop freely and fully.

Martin then described ways for bringing up babies that would actualize the objectives:

1. breast-feeding, on the babies' own schedule, was a primary need;
2. the parent and the educator must protect the child's natural sense of bodily pleasure in his or her own functions of elimination, sleep, play, washing, and dressing;
3. it is important "that the child's pleasure in his own body and its capacity for sexual gratification not be destroyed";
4. masturbation in the infant must be supported and respectfully treated as a natural function (affirmed, not neurotically rejected or suppressed, or overly emphasized);
5. the child must be allowed to find and explore its place in the world with the help, but not the direction, of adults;
6. to the extent their own character structures allow, the parents and

other adults must not interfere with the child's normal rhythms (self-regulation) (3:18-32).

Martin's article set a pattern for other writers on self-regulation.

In their writings and lectures, the people who worked on the issue of self-regulation subscribe to Martin's basic approach. In the articles by Ilse Ollendorff Reich (17:81-90), Felicia Saxe (18:35-72), Richard Singer (19:165-168), Elizabeth Tyson (20:91-94), Ernst Walter (21:11-17), the same basic points are made repeatedly. There is in these works, and Neill's as well, a clear statement: This is what you do if you want your child to be self-regulated. This is what sets off this process from other, more repressive ways of raising children. There is a clear and consistent sense of noting the difference between "our ways" and "their ways" (17:81-90; 3:18-32).

But, as mentioned above, by the time we come to the more recent writings on self-regulation and its application, we are no longer faced with the strict authoritarian order of Reich's and Neill's time. In the sixties, many of the ideas of Reich and Neill were "superficially" accepted and applied on a wide scale. The problem in the 1960s became how to deal, not with authoritarian, repressive rigidity, but with chaotic permissiveness.

The response of some workers, who continued to apply Reich's and Neill's ideas to childrearing and education, was to become more concerned with setting limits and maintaining "rational order." This trend is seen particularly in the work of Patricia Greene (6:181-203), Richard Blasband (22:120-123), and Michael Ganz (23:249-262). Ms. Greene, who ran The Fifteenth Street School, had already, by the 1960s, modified Neill's idea of self-government, and the idea that all that was needed was for adults to allow for self-regulation to survive in the new organism, and to protect the child as it grows and learns. This modification in practice was necessary. In Greene's own words: "Due to permissiveness at home, to abandonment by parents of their natural authority, to the loss of energetic and emotional contact in life, and to an intellectualization of feelings, parents are raising children whose structures are very weakly held together." And thus: "We can only give the children as much freedom as they can tolerate." (6:185)

What is clearly asserted in these recent writings, and particularly in Dr. Koopman's extensive examination of recent developments (a major reference for most of the recent work on self-regulation), is that:

1. Reich's ideas are sound and still demonstrably accurate;
2. there have been real distortions of Reich's and Neill's work;
3. the fundamental ideas and methods of self-regulation are still applicable;
4. we are faced with more and more individuals who have been "reared with the illusion of freedom" and who suffer an "intolerable tension which they cannot comprehend." (2:56-57)

Such individuals are hardly the genuine product of self-regulated freedom. Neither are they proof of the failure of Reich's and Neill's ideas, nor are they the justification for changing drastically those ideas to deal with childrearing in this day and age. On the contrary, a more active application of these ideas is needed to the fullest extent possible within our armored society.

We see that Reich's shining dream of a sexual revolution has not come about. Sexual repression has indeed given way, but license—not freedom with responsibility—has been the outcome. This is due to the distortion of self-regulation and sex-economic principles by armored man (2:57).

Those who read past and present literature on self-regulation will have no trouble seeing that there is a clear set of principles and a specific approach. The outcome of a rational application of these principles and practices over generations would be a profound and radical restructuring of the human character and social structure.

We shall not be the ones to build this future. We have no right to tell our children how to build their future since we proved unfit to build our own present. What, as transmission belts, we can do, however, is to tell our children exactly where and how we failed. We can, furthermore, do everything possible to remove the obstacles which are in the way of our children in building a new and better world for themselves. (11:195)

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